

MYTHS OF THE CHEROKEES.


BY

JAMES MOONEY.

Reprinted from the Journal of American Folk-Lore, No. 2, July-Sept., 1888.

CAMBRIDGE:

Printed at the Riverside Press.
1888.



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2011 with funding from
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

THE JOURNAL OF AMERICAN FOLK-LORE.

VOL. I. — JULY-SEPTEMBER, 1888. — No. II.

MYTHS OF THE CHEROKEES.

THE Cherokees are undoubtedly the most important tribe in the United States, as well as one of the most interesting, being exceeded in point of numbers only by the Sioux, and possibly also by the Chippewas, while in regard to wealth, intelligence, and general adaptability to civilization they are far ahead of any other of our tribes. Their original home was the beautiful mountain region of the Southern Alleghanies, in North and South Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Alabama, with their settlements chiefly upon the head-waters of the Savannah and the Tennessee. They first came into collision with the advancing white population in 1760, and from that time their history is a constant record of wars and land cessions until the final treaty of New Echota in 1835, when the body of the tribe abandoned their homes and removed to the Indian Territory, where they are now known as the "Cherokee Nation," and number about seventeen thousand, besides several thousand adopted Indians, whites, and negroes. By the terms of the treaty a few hundred were allowed to remain behind, on individual grants, while a much larger number managed to elude the clutches of the soldiers in the general round-up, and fled to the mountains. Through the efforts of William H. Thomas, an influential trader among them, most of these were afterward concentrated on adjacent tracts in Western North Carolina. They are now known as the "Eastern Band of Cherokees," and number in all about two thousand, of whom twelve hundred are settled on a reservation in Swain and Jackson counties; three hundred are at Cheowah, some thirty miles farther west; while the remainder are scattered mixed-bloods, retaining but few of the Indian characteristics. Excepting these last, very few know enough English to converse intelligently. Remaining in their native mountains, away from railroads and progressive white civilization, they retain many customs and traditions which have been lost by those who removed to the West. They still keep up their old dances and ball-plays, — although these have sadly degenerated, — their medicine-men, con-

juring, songs, and legends. The Cherokee syllabary, invented by one of the tribe about sixty years ago, has enabled them to preserve in a written form much which in other tribes depends upon oral tradition, and soon disappears before the pressure of civilization. The fact that many of these legends are connected with mountains, streams, and water-falls with which they have been familiar from childhood also goes a long way toward keeping the stories fresh in memory.

The following stories are specimens of a number collected, together with other material, for the Bureau of Ethnology, in the summer of 1887. The first is one of the best known of the Cherokee myths of a sacred character, and in the old times any one who heard it, with all the explanation, was obliged to "go to water" after the recital; that is, to bathe in the running stream at daybreak, before eating, while the medicine-man went through his mystic ceremonies on the bank. I heard the story in its entirety from two of the best story-tellers, one of whom is a medicine-man, and the other is supposed to be skilled in all their hunting secrets. Neither of them speak English. In addition, so many beliefs and customs turn upon this story of Kanati that I probably heard each of the principal incidents at least half a dozen times. There is a sequel to the story, which goes on to tell how, after the departure of Kanati and his sons, the people were nearly starving because they could find no game, until they sent for the boys, who came and taught them the songs and ceremonies with which to call up the deer. These songs are also among my notes. They taught the people no bear-songs, because the bear was still a man. The heroes of this story are in some way connected with the thunder, and are sometimes confounded with the Thunder Boys, who defeated a celebrated gambler known as *Ū^{tsaiy}'* or "Brass," but, until more information is at hand, I prefer to treat them as distinct characters. In the Cherokee words the vowels have the Latin sound, as in the alphabet of the Bureau of Ethnology: *ā* is pronounced as in but, *â* as in law, *aⁿ* and *uⁿ* nasal, and *d* and *g* almost like *t* and *k*.

KANATI AND SELU: THE ORIGIN OF CORN AND GAME.

When I was a boy, this is what the old men told me they had heard when they were boys.

Long ages ago, soon after the world was made, a hunter and his wife lived at Looking-glass Mountain,¹ with their only child, a little

¹ Called by the Cherokees *Tsúwā'teldū'ī* or *Tsuwā'téldā*, in Transylvania County, North Carolina, near Brevard. The peculiar appearance of this mountain, with its precipitous face seamed by vertical strata of various colors, has caused a number of strange ideas and stories to centre about the location.

boy. The father's name was Kǎnátǐ, "The Lucky Hunter," and his wife was called Sélu, "Corn." No matter when Kanati went into the woods, he never failed to bring back a load of game, which his wife cut up and prepared, washing the blood from the meat in the river near the house. The little boy used to play down by the river every day, and one morning the old people thought they heard laughing and talking in the bushes, as though there were two children there. When the boy came home at night, his parents asked who had been playing with him all day. "He comes out of the water," said the boy, "and he calls himself my elder brother. He says his mother was cruel to him, and threw him into the river." Then they knew that the strange boy had sprung from the blood of the game which Selu had washed off at the river's edge.

Every day, when the little boy went out to play, the other would join him; but, as he always went back into the water, the old people never had a chance to see him. At last, one evening, Kanati said to his son, "To-morrow, when the other boy comes to play with you, get him to wrestle with you, and when you have your arms around him hold on to him and call for us." The boy promised to do as he was told; so the next day, as soon as his playmate appeared, he challenged him to a wrestling-match. The other agreed at once, but as soon as they had their arms around each other Kanati's boy began to scream for his father. The old folks at once came running down, and when the wild boy saw them he struggled to free himself, and cried out, "Let me go! You threw me away!" But his brother held on until his parents reached the spot, when they seized the wild boy and took him home with them. They kept him in the house until they had tamed him, but he was always wild and artful in his disposition, and was the leader of his brother in every mischief. Before long the old people discovered that he was one of those persons endowed with magic powers (*adǎweliḥ*), and they called him *Ínǎgě Utǎsǎliḥ*, "He who grew up Wild."

Whenever Kanati went into the mountains he always brought back a fat buck or doe, or may be a couple of turkeys. One day the wild boy said to his brother, "I wonder where our father gets all that game; let's follow him next time, and find out." A few days afterward, Kanati took a bow and some feathers in his hand, and started off. The boys waited a little while, and then started after him, keeping out of sight, until they saw their father go into a swamp where there were a great many of the reeds (*wǎtikiḥ*) that hunters use to make arrow-shafts. Then the wild boy changed himself into a puff of bird's down (*atsǐ'í*), which the wind took up and carried until it alighted upon Kanati's shoulder just as he entered the swamp, but Kanati knew nothing about it. The hunter then cut

reeds, fitted the feathers to them, and made some arrows, and the wild boy—in his other shape—thought, “I wonder what those things are for.” When Kanati had his arrows finished, he came out of the swamp and went on again. The wind blew the down from his shoulder; it fell in the woods, when the wild boy took his right shape again, and went back and told his brother what he had seen. Keeping out of sight of their father, they followed him up the mountain until he stopped at a certain place and lifted up a large rock. At once a buck came running out, which Kanati shot, and then, lifting it upon his back, he started home again. “Oho!” said the boys, “he keeps all the deer shut up in that hole, and whenever he wants venison he just lets one out, and kills it with those things he made in the swamp.” They hurried and reached home before their father, who had the heavy deer to carry, so that he did not know they had followed him.

A few days after, the boys went back to the swamp, cut some reeds and made seven arrows, and then started up the mountain to where their father kept the game. When they got to the place they lifted up the rock, and a deer came running out. Just as they drew back to shoot it, another came out, and then another, and another, until the boys got confused and forgot what they were about. In those days all the deer had their tails hanging down, like other animals, but, as a buck was running past, the wild boy struck its tail with his arrow so that it stood straight out behind. This pleased the boys, and when the next one ran by, the other brother struck his tail so that it pointed upward. The boys thought this was good sport, and when the next one ran past, the wild boy struck his tail so that it stood straight up, and his brother struck the next one so hard with his arrow that the deer’s tail was curled over his back. The boys thought this was very pretty, and ever since the deer has carried his tail over his back.

The deer continued to pass until the last one had come out of the hole and escaped into the forest. Then followed droves of raccoons, rabbits, and all the other four-footed animals. Last came great flocks of turkeys, pigeons, and partridges that darkened the air like a cloud, and made such a noise with their wings that Kanati, sitting at home, heard the sound like distant thunder on the mountains, and said to himself, “My bad boys have got into trouble. I must go and see what they are doing.”

So Kanati went up the mountain, and when he came to the place where he kept the game he found the two boys standing by the rock, and all the birds and animals were gone. He was furious, but, without saying a word, he went down into the cave and kicked the covers off four jars in one corner, when out swarmed bed-bugs, fleas,

lice, and gnats (*kāhlyāstī*, *tsu'kū*, *tīnū* *dasi'* - *nū*), and got all over the boys. They screamed with pain and terror, and tried to beat off the insects; but the thousands of insects crawled over them, and bit and stung them, until both dropped down nearly dead from exhaustion. Kanati stood looking on until he thought they had been punished enough, when he brushed off the vermin, and proceeded to give the boys a lecture. "Now, you rascals," said he, "you have always had plenty to eat, and never had to work for it. Whenever you were hungry, all I had to do was to come up here and get a deer or a turkey, and bring it home for your mother to cook. But now you have let out all the animals, and after this, when you want a deer to eat, you will have to hunt all over the woods for it, and then may be not find one. Go home now to your mother, while I see if I can find something to eat for supper."

When the boys reached home again they were very tired and hungry, and asked their mother for something to eat. "There is no meat," said Selu, "but wait a little while, and I will get you something." So she took a basket and started out to the provision-house (*ū'wātā'lī*). This provision-house was built upon poles high up from the ground, to keep it out of the reach of animals, and had a ladder to climb up by, and one door, but no other opening. Every day, when Selu got ready to cook the dinner, she would go out to the provision-house with a basket, and bring it back full of corn and beans. The boys had never been inside the provision-house, and wondered where all the corn and beans could come from, as the house was not a very large one; so, as soon as Selu went out of the door, the wild boy said to his brother, "Let's go and see what she does." They ran around and climbed up at the back of the provision-house, and pulled out a piece of clay from between the logs, so that they could look in. There they saw Selu standing in the middle of the room, with the basket in front of her on the floor. Leaning over the basket, she rubbed her stomach — *so* — and the basket was half-full of corn. Then she rubbed under her arm-pits — *so* — and the basket was full to the top with beans.¹ The brothers looked at each other, and said, "This will never do; our mother is a witch. If we eat any of that it will poison us. We must kill her."

When the boys came back into the house, Selu knew their thoughts before they spoke.² "So you are going to kill me!" said Selu. "Yes," said the boys; "you are a witch." "Well," said their mother, "when you have killed me, clear a large piece of ground in front of the house, and drag my body seven times around the circle.

¹ This rubbing the body to procure provisions appears also in another Cherokee story, "The Bear Man."

² This mind-reading is also common in Cherokee and other Indian stories.

Then drag me seven times over the ground inside the circle, and stay up all night and watch, and in the morning you will have plenty of corn." Then the boys killed her with their clubs, and cut off her head, and put it up on the roof of the house, and told it to look for her husband. Then they set to work to clear the ground in front of the house, but, instead of clearing the whole piece, they cleared only seven little spots. This is the reason why corn now grows only in a few places instead of over the whole world. Then they dragged the body of Selu around the circles, and wherever her blood fell on the ground the corn sprang up. But, instead of dragging her body seven times across the ground, they did this only twice, which is the reason why the Indians still work their crop but twice. The two brothers sat up and watched their corn all night, and in the morning it was fully grown and ripe.

When Kanati came home at last, he looked around, but could not see Selu anywhere, so he asked the boys where their mother was. "She was a witch, and we killed her," said the boys; "there is her head up there on top of the house." When Kanati saw his wife's head on the roof he was very angry, and said, "I won't stay with you any longer. I am going to the Wă'hăyă [Wolf] people." So he started off, but, before he had gone far, the wild boy changed himself again to a tuft of down, which fell on Kanati's shoulder. When Kanati reached the settlement of the Wolf people, they were holding a council in the town-house (*d's[ɛ] égwā*). He went in and sat down, with the tuft of bird's down on his shoulder. When the Wolf chief asked him his business, he said, "I have two bad boys at home, and I want you to go in seven days from now and play against them." Kanati spoke as though he wanted them to play a game of ball, but the wolves knew that he meant for them to come and kill the two boys. The wolves promised to go. Then the bird's down blew off from Kanati's shoulder, and the smoke carried it up through the hole in the roof of the town-house. When it came down on the ground outside, the wild boy took his right shape again, and went home and told his brother all that he had heard in the town-house. When Kanati left the Wolf people, he did not return home, but went on farther.

The boys then began to get ready for the wolves, and the wild boy — the magician — told his brother what to do. They ran around the house in a wide circle until they had made a trail all around it, excepting on the side from which the wolves would come, where they left a small open space.¹ Then they made four large bundles

¹ When the conjurer, by his magic spells, coils the great serpent around the house of a sick man, to keep off the witches, he is always careful to leave a small open space between the head and tail of the snake, so that the members of the family can go down to the spring to get water.

of arrows, and placed them at four different points on the outside of the circle, after which they hid themselves in the woods and waited for the wolves. On the appointed day a whole army of wolves came and surrounded the house, to kill the boys. The wolves did not notice the trail around the house, because they came in where the boys had left the opening, but the moment they were inside the circle the trail changed to a high fence, and shut them in. Then the boys on the outside took their arrows and began shooting them down, and, as the wolves could not jump over the fence, they were all killed excepting a few, which escaped through the opening into a great swamp close by. Then the boys ran around the swamp, and a circle of fire sprang up in their tracks, and set fire to the grass and bushes, and burned up nearly all the other wolves. Only two or three got away, and these were all the wolves which were left in the whole world.¹

Soon afterward some strangers from a distance, who heard that the brothers had a wonderful grain from which they made bread, came to ask for some; for none but Selu and her family had ever known corn before. The boys gave them seven grains of corn, which they told them to plant the next night on their way home, sitting up all night to watch the corn, which would have seven ripe ears in the morning. These they were to plant the next night, and watch in the same way; and so on every night until they reached home, when they would have corn enough to supply the whole people. The strangers lived seven days' journey away. They took the seven grains of corn, and started home again. That night they planted the seven grains, and watched all through the darkness until morning, when they saw seven tall stalks, each stalk bearing a ripened ear. They gathered the ears with gladness, and went on their way. The next night they planted all their corn, and guarded it with wakeful care until daybreak, when they found an abundant increase. But the way was long and the sun was hot, and the people grew tired. On the last night before reaching home they fell asleep, and in the morning the corn they had planted had not even sprouted. They brought with them to their settlement what corn they had left, and planted it, and with care and attention were able to raise a crop. But ever since the corn must be watched and tended through half the year, which before would grow and ripen in a night.

As Kanati did not return, the boys at last concluded to go and see if they could find him. The wild boy got a wheel (*tikwālelū*'), and rolled it toward the direction where it is always night.² In a little

¹ In Cherokee mythology, the wolf is the watch-dog and servant of Kanati, and no hunter who holds to the old ways would ever dare to kill one.

² *Usûhíyí*: the common word is *wudeligh*, "where it sets." These archaic

while the wheel came rolling back, and the boys knew their father was not there. Then the wild boy rolled it to the south and to the north, and each time the wheel came back to him, and they knew their father was not there. Then he rolled it toward the Sun Land, (another archaic name), and it did not return. "Our father is there," said the wild boy, "let us go and find him." So the two brothers set off toward the east, and after travelling a long time they came upon Kanati, walking along, with a little dog by his side. "You bad boys," said their father, "have you come here?" "Yes," they answered; "we always accomplish what we start out to do, — we are men!" "This dog overtook me four days ago," then said Kanati; but the boys knew that the dog was the wheel which they had sent after him to find him. "Well," said Kanati, "as you have found me, we may as well travel together, but I will take the lead."¹

Soon they came to a swamp, and Kanati told them there was a dangerous thing there, and they must keep away from it. Then he went on ahead, but as soon as he was out of sight the wild boy said to his brother, "Come and let us see what is in the swamp." They went in together, and in the middle of the swamp they found a large panther, asleep. The wild boy got out an arrow, and shot the panther in the side of the head. The panther turned his head, and the other boy shot him on that side. He turned his head away again, and the two brothers shot together, — *tust, kust, kust!* But the panther was not hurt by the arrows, and paid no more attention to the boys. They came out of the swamp, and soon overtook Kanati, waiting for them. "Did you find it?" asked Kanati. "Yes," said the boys, "we found it, but it never hurt us. We are men!" Kanati was surprised, but said nothing, and they went on again.

After a while Kanati turned to them, and said, "Now you must be careful. We are coming to a tribe called the *Ūndātūskī*, 'Cookers' [*i. e.* Cannibals], and if they get you they will put you in a pot and feast on you." Then he went on ahead. Soon the boys came to a tree which had been struck by lightning, and the wild boy directed his brother to gather some of the splinters from the tree, and told him what to do with them.² In a little while they came to the set-

expressions give a peculiar beauty to the stories, which is lost in the translation. As the interpreter said when he called my attention to it, "I love to hear these old words."

¹ In another version the wheel is an arrow, which the wild boy shoots toward the four cardinal points, and finally straight up, when it comes back no more. When they get above the sky they find Kanati and Selu sitting together, with the arrow sticking in the ground in front of them.

² The medicine-men claim to do wonderful things by means of the wood of a tree which has been struck by lightning. Some of the splinters are also buried in the ground in the fields, to make the corn grow.

tlement of the cannibals, who, as soon as they saw the boys, came running out, crying, "Good! Here are two nice, fat strangers. Now we'll have a grand feast!" They caught the boys and dragged them into the town-house, and sent word to all the people of the settlement to come to the feast. They made up a great fire, filled a large pot with water and set it to boiling, and then seized the wild boy and threw him into the pot, and put the lid on it. His brother was not frightened in the least, and made no attempt to escape, but quietly knelt down and began putting the splinters into the fire, as if to make it burn better. When the cannibals thought the meat was about ready, they lifted the lid from the pot, and that instant a blinding light filled the town-house, and the lightning began to dart from one side to the other, *beating down* the cannibals until not one of them was left alive. Then the lightning went up through the smoke-hole, and the next moment there were the two boys standing outside the town-house as though nothing had happened. They went on, and soon met Kanati, who seemed much surprised to see them, and said, "What! are you here again?" "Oh, yes, we never give up. We are great men!" "What did the cannibals do to you?" "We met them, and they brought us to their town-house, but they never hurt us." Kanati said nothing more, and they went on.

Kanati soon got out of sight of the boys, but they kept on until they came to the end of the world, where the sun comes out. The sky was just coming down when they got there, but they waited until it went up again, and then they went through and climbed up on the other side.¹ There they found Kanati and Selu sitting together. The old folks received them kindly, and were glad to see them, and told them they might stay there a while, but then they must go to live where the sun goes down. The boys stayed with their parents seven days, and then went on toward the sunset land, where they are still living.

A number of the incidents in this story have parallels in the

¹ The earth is a flat surface, and the sky is an arch of solid rock suspended above it. This arch rises and falls continually, so that the space at the point of juncture is constantly opening and closing, like a pair of scissors. The sun is a man (some say a woman), so bright that no one can look at him long enough to see his exact shape, who comes through the eastern opening every morning, travels across the heavens, and disappears through the western opening, returning by night to the starting-point. This was discovered by seven young men who started out to find where the sun rises. They succeeded in passing through the eastern opening, but on their return one was crushed by the descending rock, and only six got back alive to tell the story. Mr. J. Owen Dorsey has found the same theory of the sun and horizon among the Omahas and Ponkas.

Omaha and Ponka myths collected by Mr. J. Owen Dorsey, of the Bureau of Ethnology, which will appear in the forthcoming Volume VI. Part I., of "Contributions to North American Ethnology." In one of these stories, "The Rabbit and the Grizzly Bear," the rabbit makes a boy, who proves to be a magician, out of the clotted blood of the game which he has killed. The same idea appears in the Dakota myth, "The Blood-Clots Boy" (published in the "Iapi Oaye" [Word Carrier], Chicago, April and May, 1881). In the Omaha story of "Two-faces and the Twin Brothers," the wild boy is caught by stratagem by his father and brother, but ever afterward is constantly enticing his brother into mischief. The magician, who changes himself into a feather, and allows himself to be blown about by the wind, in order to accomplish his purposes, appears also in "The Corn Woman and the Buffalo Woman." The underground abode of the animals figures in the story of "Ictinike, the Brothers and Sister," while there are several minor coincidences which are of interest as showing similar habits of thought among widely separated tribes.

The next story belongs to a cycle of animal myths, chiefly of an amusing character, in which the rabbit is the principal hero and the author of all the mischief. They resemble the Uncle Remus stories, which I hope yet to prove are of Indian origin. The animals of the Cherokee stories had chiefs and town-houses, could talk and sing and play ball, held dances and councils, and went to war. They were of gigantic size, and finally left the earth and "went up." The degenerate specimens that we are accustomed to see are but poor counterfeits, which came on the stage at a later period.

HOW THE DEER OBTAINED HIS HORNS.

In the old days the animals were fond of amusement, and were constantly getting up grand meetings and contests of various kinds, with prizes for the winner. On one occasion a prize was offered to the animal with the finest coat, and although the otter deserved to win it, the rabbit stole his coat, and nearly got the prize for himself. After a while the animals got together again, and made a large pair of horns, to be given to the best runner. The race was to be through a thicket, and the one who made the best time, with the horns on his head, was to get them. Everybody knew from the first that either the deer or the rabbit would be the winner, but bets were high on the rabbit, who was a great runner and a general favorite. But the rabbit had no tail, and always went by jumps, and his friends were afraid that the horns would make him fall over in the bushes unless he had something to balance them, so they fixed up a tail for him with a stick and some bird's down.

"Now," says the rabbit, "let me look over the ground where I am to run."

So he went into the thicket, and was gone so long that at last one of the animals went to see what had become of him, and there he found the rabbit hard at work gnawing down bushes and cutting off the hanging limbs of the trees, and making a road for himself clear through to the other side of the swamp. The messenger did not let the rabbit see him, but came back quietly and told his story to the others. Pretty soon the rabbit came out again, ready to put on the horns and begin the race, but several of the animals said that he had been gone so long that it looked as if he must have been cutting a road through the bushes. The rabbit denied it up and down, but they all went into the thicket, and there was the open road, sure enough. Then the chief got very angry, and said to the rabbit, "Since you are so fond of the business, you may spend the rest of your life gnawing twigs and bushes," and so the rabbit does to this day. The other animals would not allow the rabbit to run at all now, so they put the horns on the deer, who plunged into the worst part of the thicket, and made his way out to the other side, then turned round and came back again on a different track, in such fine style that every one said he had won the horns. But the rabbit felt sore about it, and resolved to get even with him.

One day, soon after the contest for the horns, the rabbit stretched a large grape-vine across the trail, and gnawed it nearly in two in the middle. Then he went back a piece, took a good run, and jumped up at the vine. He kept on running and jumping up at the vine, until the deer came along and asked him what he was doing.

"Don't you see?" says the rabbit. "I'm so strong that I can bite through that grape-vine at one jump."

The deer could hardly believe this, and wanted to see it done. So the rabbit ran back, made a tremendous spring, and bit through the vine where he had gnawed it before. The deer, when he saw that, said, "Well, I can do it if you can." So the rabbit stretched a larger grape-vine across the trail, but without gnawing it in the middle. Then the deer ran back as he had seen the rabbit do, made a powerful spring, and struck the grape-vine right in the centre; but it only flew back, and threw him over on his head. He tried again and again, until he was all bruised and bleeding.

"Let me see your teeth," at last said the rabbit. So the deer showed him his teeth, which were long and sharp, like a wolf's teeth.

"No wonder you can't do it," says the rabbit; "your teeth are too blunt to bite anything. Let me sharpen them for you, like mine. My teeth are so sharp that I can cut through a stick just like a knife." And he showed him a black-locust twig, of which rabbits

gnaw the young shoots, which he had shaved off as well as a knife could do it, just in rabbit fashion.

The deer thought that was just the thing. So the rabbit got a hard stone, with rough edges, and filed and filed away at the deer's teeth, until they were filed down almost to the gums.

"Now try it," says the rabbit. So the deer tried again, but this time he could n't bite at all.

"Now you've paid for your horns," said the rabbit, as he laughed and started home through the bushes. Ever since then the deer's teeth are so blunt that he cannot chew anything but grass and leaves.

James Mooney.

*



